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You Are In: Policy News > 2010 Statements > Remarks by Senator George J. Mitchell at Palestine Investment Conference

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Remarks by Senator George J. Mitchell at Palestine Investment Conference

The Palestine Investment Conference
Bethlehem, West Bank
June 3, 2010

Thank you, Maysoon. Ministers, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, I appreciate the opportunity to be here with you.

Last night, I met with an impressive and diverse group of Palestinian business men and women. Under challenging circumstances, these entrepreneurs are leading vibrant, dynamic businesses that are growing, trading and creating economic opportunity and jobs.

They share with us a vision for a better future in which Palestinians and Israelis live side by side, in their own states, in peace and security. A vision where a future state of Palestine will have strong public institutions and a vibrant private sector, where the Palestinian economy will be better connected to the region and the world, and where all Palestinian families – in Gaza and the West Bank – will have the opportunity to reach their full potential.

How do we get to that vision from the current reality? First, I believe and think it's important to state, that there's no such thing as a conflict that can't be ended. Conflicts are created, conducted and sustained by human beings. They can also be ended by human beings. No matter how hateful, no matter how harmful, peace can prevail.

And we all must work, every person in this room and those beyond, to create an attitude of success, the belief that problems can be solved, that Israelis can have the security they seek and that Palestinians can have the state they want. The only realistic way to do that is through the two-state solution. And the only realistic path to two states is to move forward, at the same time, on political, economic, and security issues. All are essential to success.

Economic growth has brought us here to Bethlehem this week, and it is what the ambitious reforms of the Palestinian Authority are doing on a daily basis. That is also why President Obama sent me here with a delegation of senior Administration officials and dedicated Palestinian Americans, including Ziad Asali, who leads the American Task Force on Palestine, Sa'ed Nashef, who has initiated the Middle East Venture Capital Fund, Neal Wolin, our Deputy Secretary of the Treasury.

Alongside our international partners, including Quartet representative Tony Blair and his team in the region, the U.S. is working diligently to support the Palestinian Authority's two-year plan, to build their economy and strengthen their institutions, so that on the day when a Palestinian state is established, it will be a stable and prosperous partner in this region.

The Palestinian Authority is moving in the right direction. Its strong and transparent fiscal policies, supported by more than \$3 billion in donor assistance over the past two years, and its commitment to security and to the rule of law in the West Bank, helped generate significant economic growth in 2009.

You can see that growth in businesses like Wataniya, the Palestinians' second mobile telephone provider, whose subscriptions have risen steadily since its November launch. You can see it in the construction sector, where nine affordable housing initiatives, which could result in 16,000 new affordable units, are in various

stages of development throughout the West Bank. You can see it in the tens of thousands of tourists who travelled here to Bethlehem during the Christmas season. You can see it on the roads and crossings of the West Bank, where there is improved access to domestic and external markets; not fast enough, or broad enough, but the direction is the right one. That is true, of course, in each of these areas which I've mentioned. As we measure the distance travelled, we acknowledge the distance still to go.

But as this conference makes clear, the Palestinian Authority's efforts are paying off, inspiring investor and consumer confidence locally and around the globe. More than 2,000 individuals, from 35 countries, and hundreds of local, regional and international companies are represented at this conference. The investments pledged here will spur further growth in all sectors of the Palestinian economy, from agriculture to industry, from tourism to IT, creating jobs, laying the foundation for future prosperity, and bringing new hope to Palestinians from Jenin to Hebron, from Jericho to Ramallah to Gaza City.

There have been many large projects announced over these past few days. One prominent example of course is the launching of AMAL, the half-billion dollar mortgage finance facility established by the Overseas Private Investment Corporation, with the Palestine Investment Fund, the International Finance Corporation, and two U.S. non-profits, the Middle East Investment Initiative (MEII), and CHF International. AMAL is aimed at extending affordable long-term mortgages of up to 25 years to families with moderate incomes. As you know, Amal, in Arabic, means "hope," a fitting title for a project that has the potential to give so many Palestinians the security of owning a home. Creation of this mortgage facility also should help bolster the affordable housing initiatives, boost the local construction market, and create jobs in the near-term.

In the important information technology sector, Cisco is expanding its support to young entrepreneurs and technology start-ups, and emerging Palestinian firms are installing wifi in parts of the West Bank.

The efforts and results here are all the more impressive because the current global economic environment, and the immediate political environment in this region, pose serious challenges, among them the events of this past weekend.

The United States deeply regrets the tragic loss of life and injuries suffered among those involved in the incident aboard the Gaza-bound ships. The U.S. and the international community have been working closely to coordinate our efforts and reaction. We joined in and support the Security Council's statement on this tragedy. We will continue to work aggressively to see that the full range of the needs of all of the people of Gaza are met.

This incident underscores the need to make progress in negotiations that lead to the two-state solution. The tragedy of last week cannot be allowed to spiral out of control and undermine the limited but real progress that's been made.

I was here, in Bethlehem, in 2001, in the aftermath of an earlier tragedy that spun out of control. At that time, almost all of the hotels had closed. Those that remained open were empty; there were no tourists. Holding a large and vibrant Palestinian investment conference here was inconceivable at that time. So it is deeply moving for me personally to be here with you today, to see the extent to which Bethlehem is once again thriving, to join you at this second Palestine Investment Conference in this very impressive facility, to emphasize how critical it is that we keep moving forward, despite obstacles and challenges, not letting them defeat or deter us from our objectives.

What has happened makes your work here and going forward critical. Strengthening the Palestinian economy and building Palestinian institutions goes hand in hand with the need for political negotiations to establish a Palestinian state.

We need a clear political horizon to drive economic development, security reform, and capacity building, for that Palestinian state. On the political track, we need to know that once that negotiated outcome is reached, indeed on the day an agreement is reached, there will be institutions ready and prepared to run the new state, and an economy able to bear its responsibilities to its people. These are mutually reinforcing tasks. Neither will succeed without the other.

There are, of course, many reasons to be skeptical and to doubt the prospect for success. The conflict is complex, it has gone on for so long, it has had such destructive effects, the level of mistrust and hostility is very high. But, as you all have shown through your ongoing efforts and commitment to building the Palestinian state, persistence – and steadfastness – are essential. The pursuit of peace is so important that it demands our maximum effort, no matter the difficulties, no matter the setbacks.

Immediately after he took office, President Obama moved swiftly to place comprehensive peace in the Middle East high on the United States' list of priorities. The conflict in Gaza had just ended, and it seemed that the culture of peace, once so carefully nurtured, had entirely evaporated, replaced by a sense of futility, of despair, and of inevitable conflict. Few people believed that there was any chance for re-starting peace negotiations let alone reaching an agreement.

And yet, limited as it has been, there has been some progress. We recently started proximity talks with Israeli and Palestinian leaders. These are serious and wide-ranging discussions, with both sides trying to move forward under difficult circumstances. We need to keep them going. And we will do everything possible to help the parties move, as soon as possible, into direct negotiations that will result in a two-state solution.

We recognize, of course, that it would be easy for me and everyone else in this room to draw up a list of the many issues that remain unresolved, of the huge obstacles to resolving them, and of the long litany of past efforts that did not succeed. So, we are realistic about the difficulties.

We also know we cannot impose a solution. It is up to the parties themselves to negotiate directly and ultimately resolve this conflict, with the sustained presence and support of the U.S. and many other important and contributing nations.

This will require compromise, perseverance, flexibility, and most of all it will require leadership. We believe that President Abbas and Prime Minister Netanyahu are leaders who can deliver peace to their people. Toward that end, we expect all concerned to act boldly and consistently. Even in the face of crisis, the parties must continue at the negotiating table. Any other course of action will strengthen extremists and deprive the people of the Middle East of the more peaceful and prosperous future they want and deserve.

The United States is committed to being an active partner every step of the way. As Secretary Clinton said on March 9, "This is about getting to the table, creating and protecting an atmosphere of trust around it – and staying there until the job is finally done." I know that the businessmen and women in this room understand Secretary Clinton's words. In business you have ups and downs, periods of plenty and times of want. And yet, you weather each downturn and take full advantage of the good opportunities when they come.

We will continue to work with the parties toward a political solution. We will continue to support the Palestinian Authority in its efforts to strengthen and reform its institutions and expand and grow the Palestinian economy.

We welcome your support and the support of everyone in the room and applaud your efforts and the support of public and private partners the world over. And we hope and pray and we are working to see that through the efforts of all involved, we can end this conflict and look forward to a future Palestinian state that is secure, stable, peaceful, and prosperous. Thank you

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